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AN EXHIBITION OF PAINTINGS AND DRAWINGS

# DAVID BOMBERG

1890–1957

THE ARTS COUNCIL

1958

# FOREWORD

It is a commonplace of art history that many artists fail to receive the recognition which they deserve in their lifetime. This is true of David Bomberg who died last year and who was a serious and dedicated painter little known to the general public. This is partly due to his prolonged spells of work abroad and to the fact that no major exhibition of his work has been held in London since 1936. His stylistic evolution, his passionate pursuit of form and the intensely personal contribution of his last period have been described with acute penetration by Mr Andrew Forge in his introduction to this catalogue. The Council is glad to provide an opportunity for a reappraisal of Bomberg's work and is indebted to the many owners listed on p. 27 who have lent their pictures and to those who have helped with information in the preparation of the catalogue, particularly, of course, Mrs Lilian Bomberg. P.J.

# INTRODUCTION

David Bomberg has often been described as an expressionist. The term is a notoriously loose one and it is useful here only to describe certain qualities of surface and atmosphere in his work after 1929 that seem to suggest comparison with Soutine and Kokoschka. In fact Bomberg's intentions were remote from Expressionism and the evolution of his style had little connection with the continental movement. (In a letter written a few years before his death Bomberg referred to Soutine as 'our colleague' but he does not appear to have had much direct contact with him).

He belonged to the generation of English painters who received the full impact of Fauvism and Cubism during their student years. He was born in 1890, six years after Wyndham Lewis. Among his contemporaries at the Slade were Ben Nicholson, Paul Nash, Edward Wadsworth, William Roberts, Jacob Kramer. Before he came to the Slade he had studied for a period under Sickert at Westminster and had come to reject his teaching. He considered that Sickert was trying to lay down a rigid canon, and one can see that the points on which Sickert's teaching rested, empirical observation, the abstraction on the flat of the visual image, could have meant little or nothing to him. He was able to make far better use of the teaching he received from Brown and Tonks who would have encouraged him to look at forms rather than flat shapes, to refer to his knowledge of the solids he was drawing as well as merely to his visual impression of them, to turn to Michelangelo for his example rather than to Degas or Charles Keene.

He was at the Slade from 1911 to 1913. These were the crucial years when painters in England were suddenly faced with the

fruits of a full decade of revolution in French painting. Roger Fry's 'Post-Impressionist' exhibitions, which introduced Matisse, Derain, Picasso and others to a wide public were in 1910 and 1912. The London Group was formed in 1913 and Bomberg was a founder member, contributing to its first show the following year. He also took part in an important exhibition of modern art at Whitechapel in the same year, and shortly afterwards held his first one-man show. He was in touch with the circle of Wyndham Lewis, Ezra Pound and T. E. Hulme, yet already his independence from other artists was clear. He did not take part in the Vorticist polemics of that year* nor does his signature appear in *Blast*. Hulme commented in a lengthy review of his exhibition (*The New Age*, July 1914) that he 'stands somewhat apart from the other English cubists . . . his work is certainly much more individual and less derivative . . . .'

The earliest drawing here, the Tate's 'Sleeping Men', declares Bomberg's early attachment to simple and massive forms. He understood from the beginning that they were the proper content of his art. Like most of his contemporaries he was in full reaction against anything naturalistic or Impressionist. Like them also but with a full-bloodedness that underlines his relative independence from the aesthetic sophistication of Bloomsbury, he saw cubism as a new monumental style, an art of 'pure form'. His first cubist inspired drawings were produced while he was still at the Slade; William Roberts writes of 'some fine cubist compositions' which impressed him while he was a student. It is notable that the distortions of such drawings as 'Ju-jitsu' are not in the least grotesque; in this they make a marked contrast with similar work by Wyndham Lewis, whose drawings, whatever their classical pretensions, are never free from caricature. Bomberg seems to have known from the beginning what the formalisations of cubism could offer him; the drawings are never hectic but calm, almost expressionless despite their energy.

For a time after the war he was clearly dissatisfied with his position. He produced several remarkable but not entirely satisfactory works such as the 'Ghetto Theatre 'of 1920, 'Bargee'

*He was an invited exhibitor at the Vorticist exhibition at the Doré Gallery in 1915.

of 1921 in which a cubist vocabulary of form is applied to the subject as it were from the outside. Then all traces of cubism disappear; 'Moving Vans' of 1922 has none. Obviously painted directly, it anticipates his mature style.

In 1923 he went to Palestine. For four years he travelled about, recording in a straight-forward and often meticulous manner the architecture and landscape of the country; six months of this time were spent in dramatic isolation painting the rock temples of Petra. Later he appears to have discounted the paintings of this period. Yet one cannot help feeling that it was during these years of study in a mediterranean light, faced by these intricate panoramas and craggy rock faces, that his final convictions about painting were formed.

At any rate, by 1929, after had returned to England and set out again, this time to Spain, his work had arrived at the point from which it was to continue to develop in an unwavering line until his death. Bomberg had laid down his intentions as a painter in the manifesto with which he introduced his 1914 exhibition: 'I appeal to a *Sense of Form* . . . . I am *searching for an intenser* expression . . . . Where decoration happens it is accidental. My object is the *construction of Pure Form.* I reject everything in painting that is not Pure Form. I hate the colours of the East, the Modern Mediaevalist and the Fat Man of the Renaissance.' It is a statement which might have been made by any of the painters in the Lewis-Hulme circle at the time; the phrases read as little more than conventional slogans. However as the years went by and Bomberg pressed home his search 'for an intenser expression', they become filled with meaning.

The Toledo pictures of the late '20's are unlike anything in his earlier work, or, for that matter, anything that was being done by anyone else in England at the time. The straight, violent brush strokes produce an all-over fragmentation that recall his experiments in cubism, but the emphasis is now in an entirely different place. Each brush stroke defines the *experience* of a form as well as the form itself; in these pictures he recognizes that whatever the artist means by form is something that he himself feels subjectively. It was this intuition that separated his work finally from most of his contemporaries. For many painters who

had started at the same point and with the same interests had clung to the idea that 'pure form' was something that could be realised in a completely impersonal, objective way; and that the less individual, the less particular the approach to it the purer and the more exact its realisation. Bomberg began to think of 'form' as the artist's *consciousness* of mass, a subjective thing determined by his own physical experience of gravity, density, texture*. As a result an extraordinarily strong personal note enters his work at this point; one seems to feel oneself breathing the artist's breath in front of some of these pictures.

This intense personal atmosphere has occasionally obscured their structural nature. From time to time they have been called formless; in fact the experience of form is their innermost subject.

During the last war he began to teach. This was a new and important experience. After the years of neglect and isolation he suddenly found himself *maître d'école*. It was impossible for a man of his temperament to look upon teaching as mere bread-winning from ten to five: like painting it was a total activity. Between 1946 and 1953 he became the master of a small group of talented students who unquestioningly accepted a master-pupil relationship with him. He taught them not only an artistic method but a complete aesthetic, an attitude. Bomberg worked beside them and exhibited in some of their group shows. One of his students, Richard Michelmore, has described his practice: 'to forget all teaching so as to gain confidence to attack each subject vigorously; to speak of the grandeur of the whole, of the importance of the parts only as amplification of the complete statement . . . .

Paint was only another medium for drawing . . . .

If concentration flagged he would draw your attention to the overall form . . . .

Never did we peer one-eyed at pencil stubs. Measurement was by an assessment of the total form and the appropriateness of the parts'.

In teaching in this way, encouraging his students to work from the model or the view in front of them but discouraging

* In this and in many others of his views he owed much to his reading of Bishop Berkeley.

them from describing the forms optically, Bomberg was appealing to a particular interpretation of Cézanne. In general Cézanne's influence has been felt in two different directions; he has been regarded as the source of cubism and an ancestor of abstract art. And he has been seen as indicating an art of observation, of meditation upon natural appearances. Bomberg rejected both views. He came to look upon cubism as a corruption of everything Cézanne meant, an arty misunderstanding. On the other hand he had no use for the visual. He held that the eye knew nothing about form but was merely the feeble servant of a physical sense of form*. It was this physical sense of what he called the 'spirit in the mass' that was the proper subject of art. He saw Cézanne as Michelangelo's heir and at the same time as a pioneer of a new approach to form, more direct, more physical and more profound than anything that had gone before. It is a view of Cézanne that was shared by R. G. Collingwood: 'Then came Cézanne, and began to paint like a blind man. His still-life studies . . . are like groups of things that have been groped over with the hands; he uses colour not to reproduce what he sees in looking at them but to express . . . what in this groping he has felt'.

Not a single one of the generalisations that are usually made about English painting can be applied to Bomberg's work. It is not graphic, nor illustrational, nor anecdotal. Nor is it gentle or refined, at least not in the sense in which the words are usually used of English painters. But perhaps his most important distinction is a personal one, having to do with his sense of his own standing as an artist; Bomberg was as deeply committed to painting as any man could be, and his work has no trace of that reserve, that tentativeness which causes English painting so often to look like an art of amateurs. He was always serious and he never entertained with his painting. In so far as the word has any meaning in the twentieth century he was a professional and his work, in particular the great fiery landscapes of 1948, is to be compared with the best of his contemporaries in Europe.

ANDREW FORGE

* See Berkeley. The New Theory of Vision. 1709.

# BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

1890 *5 December.* Born in Birmingham, the fifth child of a Polish immigrant leatherworker.

1895–1913 Family lived in St Mark's Street, Whitechapel, where the artist had his first studio. From the age of fourteen practised drawing in the British Museum and the Victoria and Albert Museum.

1905 *c.* Apprenticed to lithographer Paul Fischer.

1908 Broke his indentures in order to become an artist.

1908–10 Attended evening classes at the City and Guilds Schools and Sickert's evening classes at Westminster School.

1911–13 Studied at the Slade School where he won a certificate for drawing in 1912.

1913 Founder member of the London Group.

1913 *c.* Short visit to Paris where he met Picasso, Modigliani and Kisling.

1914 Poems by John Rodker published with abstract cover design by Bomberg.

*May-June.* Exhibited five pictures at exhibition *Twentieth Century Art* at the Whitechapel Art Gallery, for which he organized a Jewish section.

*July.* First one-man exhibition of 55 pictures at the Chenil Galleries, Chelsea.

1915 Married Alice Mayes.

1915–18 Served Royal Engineers.

1918 Commission to paint a picture for Canadian War Memorial.

1919 *Russian Ballet* with text and illustrations by Bomberg published by the Bomb Shop.

*October.* Exhibition (chiefly drawings) at 9 Duke Street, Adelphi.

1921 *c.* Painting expedition with Ben Nicholson up the Thames.

1920–22 Lived at Alton in Hampshire.

1922 Visit to Ben Nicholson in Switzerland.

1923 *March.* Exhibition of pen and wash drawings at Heal's Mansard Gallery.

*April.* Departure for Palestine. Lived in Jerusalem. Initially did some work for the Zionist Organization.

1924 Six-month expedition to Petra.

1927 *Autumn.* Return from Palestine.

1928 *February.* Exhibition at the Leicester Galleries.

1929 *February.* Exhibition at Ruskin Gallery, Birmingham.

*August.* First visit to Spain, spent chiefly in Toledo.

1930 *Spring.* Visited Morocco and the Greek Islands.

1932 Six-week painting expedition to Scotland.

Visit to Derbyshire to execute Shell-Mex commission for poster. The landscape submitted, *Cavedale*, was not suitable for reproduction.

1933 Six-month visit to Russia.

1934 *May.* Departure for Spain. Lived first at Cuenca, North Spain.

*November.* Moved to Ronda in Andalusia.

1935 *July-November.* Stayed at Linares in the Asturian mountains.

*November.* Return from Spain to London.

1936 *June.* Exhibition at Cooling Galleries.

*Autumn.* Painting expedition to North Wales.

1937 *January.* Retrospective exhibition with Margarete Hamerschlag and Horace Brodzky at Foyles Art Gallery.

1937 *c.* Designed costumes and sets for Co-operative Society production of *Belshazzar*, which were not finally carried out.

1942 *Summer.* Commission from War Artists' Scheme to draw bomb store near Burton-on-Trent.

1943 *November.* Exhibition at Leger Gallery.

1944 *Summer.* Painting expedition to Exmoor and North Devon, followed by visit to Anglesey.

During the war the artist obtained a number of jobs

including teaching drawing to gun crews in Hyde Park and at a youth club in Fulham.

1945 Obtained a teaching job in a school at Dagenham.

1945–49 Taught drawing one day a week at the Bartlett School of Architecture.

1946–53 Taught drawing at the Borough Polytechnic.

1947 Formation of the Borough Group; a few pupils grouped around Bomberg.

1948 *June.* Second annual exhibition of the Borough Group, at the Archer Gallery, in which Bomberg exhibited for the first time with his pupils.

*July-September.* Visit to Cyprus.

1949 *March.* Third annual exhibition of the Borough Group at the Arcade Gallery including pictures by Bomberg.

*Summer.* Exhibition of pictures by Bomberg and the Borough Group in the Junior Common Room of Brasenose College Oxford.

Borough Group dissolved.

1953 Formation of Borough Bottega; pupils grouped round Bomberg.

1953 *Easter.* Visit to Paris, Chartres and Vézelay.

*November-December.* Exhibition of the Borough Bottega, including Bomberg, at the Berkeley Galleries.

*November.* Exhibited two or three pictures on Mrs. Kemeny's stand at the Building Exhibition, Earl's Court.

1954 *January-February.* Exhibition of the Borough Bottega, including Bomberg, at Black Hall, Oxford.

*February.* Departure of Bomberg and his second wife Lilian Holt for Ronda, Spain.

*May-June.* Retrospective exhibition with the Borough Bottega at the Heffer Gallery Cambridge.

1955 *March-April.* Exhibition of the Borough Bottega, including Bomberg, at Walker's Galleries.

1956 *November-December.* Three pictures included in an exhibition at the Whitechapel Art Gallery *Jewish Artists in England 1656–1956: A Tercentenary Exhibition.*

1957 *May.* Became ill in Spain; taken to hospital in Gibraltar.

1957 *19 August.* Died in London.

# CATALOGUE

All the paintings are in oil on canvas unless otherwise stated. Measurements are given in inches, height first.

A number of the pictures are for sale. Enquiries should be made at the exhibition Gallery or direct to the Director of Art, Arts Council of Great Britain, 4 St. James's Square, London, S.W. 1

1. JU-JITSU, *circa* 1913
Oil on board, 24×24
Lent by Mrs Walter Tachuk
Shown at the artist's first one-man exhibition in 1914.

2. BARGES ON THE CANAL, 1919
23×30
Lent by Mrs J. Brook-Jones

3. GHETTO THEATRE, 1920
30×25
Lent by the Ben Uri Art Gallery
The subject is probably the Pavilion Theatre at Whitechapel which ceased to function shortly before the second world war.

4. BARGEE, 1921, *Plate 3*
36×28
Lent by Alan Collingridge, Esq.

5. CONCLAVE, 1921
30×23
Lent by Mrs Lilian Bomberg

PLATE I: ACROBATS *circa* 1913, No. 51

PLATE 2: SAPPERS AT WORK *circa* 1918, No. 58

PLATE 3: BARGEE 1921, No. 4

PLATE 4: ROCK FAÇADE, NORTH-EAST WALL, PETRA 1924, No. 16

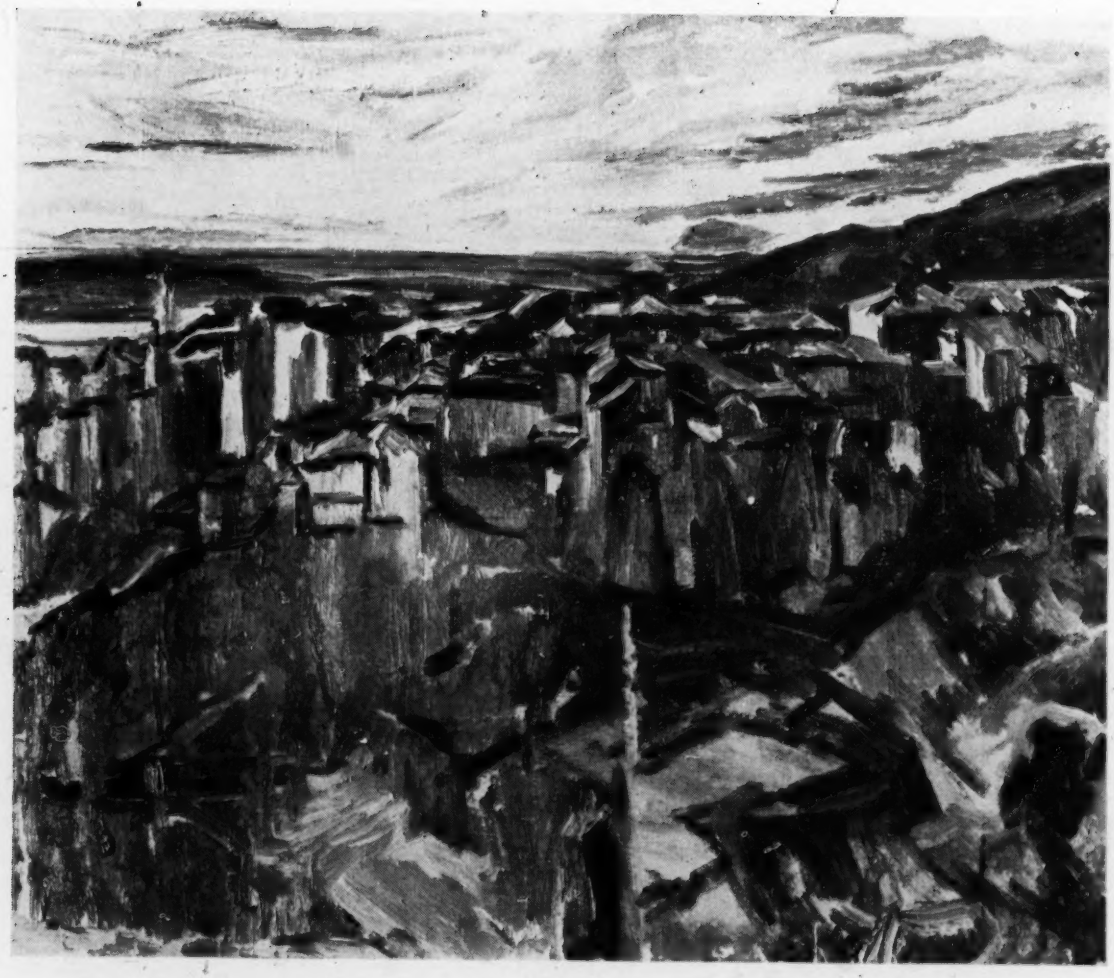

PLATE 5: SUNSET CUENA 1934, No. 25

PLATE 6: EVENING IN THE CITY OF LONDON 1944, No. 70

PLATE 7: VALLEY OF THE TAJO 1955, No. 71

PLATE 8: PORTRAIT OF LILIAN 1937, No. 35

6. MOVING VANS, 1922
24×36
Lent by Arthur Stambois, Esq.

7. THE QUARRYMEN, *circa* 1922–23
Oil on paper, 12½×16
Lent by Mrs Lilian Bomberg

This and Nos. 8 and 9 are three of a series of upwards of sixty imaginative compositions done either in England or in Palestine.

8. THE PLAYERS, CIRCUS, *circa* 1922–23
Oil on paper, 12½×16
Lent by Mrs Dorothy Savine

9. THE ISLAND: LAND AND SEA, *circa* 1922–23
Oil on paper, 12½×16
Lent by Mrs Lilian Bomberg

10. OUTSIDE THE DAMASCUS GATE, JERUSALEM, [1923
16×20
Lent by Manchester City Art Gallery

11. THE JUDEAN HILLS BETWEEN JERUSALEM AND JERICHO: MOONLIGHT, 1923
15¾×19½
Lent by Wyndham T. Vint, Esq.

12. MOUNT ZION WITH THE CHURCH OF THE DORMITION, 1923 (?)
19½×23½
Lent by Humphrey Bowman, Esq., C.M.G.

13. MOUNT ZION WITH THE CHURCH OF THE DORMITION: MOONLIGHT, 1923
16×20
Lent by the Ben Uri Art Gallery

14. THE OUTER SIQ, PETRA, 1924
20¼×24
Lent by Birmingham City Art Gallery

15. ROCK FAÇADE, PETRA; EARLY MORNING, 1924
17¾×21
Lent by Wyndham T. Vint, Esq.

16. THE ROCK FAÇADE, NORTH-EAST WALL, PETRA, 1924, *Plate 4*
23×30
Lent by John Flanagan, Esq.

17. QUARRYING: PALESTINE DEVELOPMENT, 1925
22½×29½
Lent by Wyndham T. Vint, Esq.

18. TOLEDO, 1929
23×30
Lent by Oldham Art Gallery

19. CATHEDRAL, TOLEDO, 1929
30×23
Lent by Wyndham T. Vint, Esq.

20. TOLEDO: SUNSET, 1929
23× 30
Lent by Leon Kossoff, Esq.

21. PORTRAIT OF JOHN RODKER, 1931
30×24
Lent by Mrs Marianne Rodker

22. PORTRAIT OF LILIAN, 1932
30×22
Lent by Mrs Lilian Bomberg

23. CUENCA FROM MOUNT SOCORRO, 1934
29×37
Lent by F. T. Dent Esq.

24. EAST VALLEY, CUENCA, 1934
22¼×30
Lent by Wyndham T. Vint, Esq.

25. SUNSET, CUENCA, 1934, *Plate 5*
26¼×30½
Lent by Wyndham T. Vint, Esq.

26. RONDA, 1935
29×36
Lent by John Rowlands, Esq.

27. RONDA, 1935
24×22
Lent by Mrs Lilian Bomberg

28. SUNSET, RONDA, 1935
26×30
Lent by Mrs. Dinora Marr

29. BELFRY AND CONVENT, 1935
29×25
Lent by Mrs R. Wallis

30. CHURCH PROCESSION, RONDA, 1935
23¾×19½
Lent by Mrs Lilian Bomberg

31. SUNLIGHT IN THE MOUNTAINS, ASTURIAS, [1935
28½×36
Lent by H. Manning, Esq.

32. STORM OVER PENARUBIA, 1935
30×38
Lent by Harry Barr, Esq.

33. BEDDGELERT, NORTH WALES, 1936
20×26
Lent by Mrs Lilian Bomberg

34. PORTRAIT OF THE ARTIST, 1937
20×16
Lent by Mrs Lilian Bomberg

35. PORTRAIT OF LILIAN, 1937, *Plate 8*
22×18
Lent by Mrs Lilian Bomberg

36. THAMES BARGES, 1937
20×24
Lent by John Rowlands, Esq.

37. WAPPING, 1938
20×24
Lent by Leslie Marr, Esq.

38. FLOWERS, 1943
36×28
Lent by Mrs Lilian Bomberg

39. BIDEFORD BAY, NORTH DEVON, 1944
24×30
Lent by the Laing Art Gallery, Newcastle

40. EVENING IN THE CITY OF LONDON, 1944
28½×36
Lent by Mrs Marianne Rodker

41. TREGOR AND TREGOFF, CORNWALL, 1947
32×39½
Lent by Mrs Lilian Bomberg

42. MOUNT HILARION AND THE CASTLE RUINS, [1948
39×50
Lent by Mrs Lilian Bomberg

43. MOORISH WALL, CYPRUS, 1948
28×36
Lent by Mrs Lilian Bomberg

44. ROCK FORTRESS, CYPRUS, 1948
28½×36½
Lent by Mrs Lilian Bomberg

45. PORTRAIT OF DINORA, 1952
36×28
Lent by Mrs Dinora Marr

46. ANTIGONE, 1953
28×36
Lent by Mrs Lilian Bomberg

47. RISING WIND, RONDA, 1954
27¼×35¼
Lent by Mrs Lilian Bomberg

48. VIGILANTE, 1955
Oil on board, 28×23½
Lent by Mrs Lilian Bomberg

49. 'HEAR OH ISRAEL,' 1955
Oil on board, 36×28
Lent by Mr and Mrs John Bomberg

## WATERCOLOURS AND DRAWINGS

50. SLEEPING MEN: 'MAN GOETH TO HIS LONG HOME', 1911
Watercolour, 8¾×35½
Lent by the Tate Gallery
The subject, which was set by the Slade Sketch Club, is taken from Ecclesiastes xii, 5.

51. ACROBATS, *circa* 1913, *Plate 1*
Black chalk, 18¾×22½
Lent by Mrs Lilian Bomberg

52. JU-JITSU, *circa* 1913
Black chalk, 21¾×21¾
Lent by Mrs Lilian Bomberg
Working drawing for the painting, catalogue No. 1.

53. VISION OF EZEKIEL, 1913
Black chalk, 21½×26½
Lent by Professor and Mrs Norman Bentwich

54. THE JEWISH THEATRE, 1913
Black chalk, 21¾×23¾
Lent by Leeds City Art Gallery

55. THE DANCER, *circa* 1914
Watercolour and chalk, 14¼×10¼
Lent by Mrs Sonia Joslen

This watercolour was reproduced in black and white on the cover of *Poems* by John Rodker, published in 1914.

56. BILLET, 1915
Black ink, 15½×20¼
Lent by Mrs Lilian Bomberg

57. TWO STUDIES FOR THE CANADIAN WAR PAINTING, *circa* 1918
Oil and watercolour on paper, each 9½×12½
Lent by Mrs Lilian Bomberg

Studies for the first version of the Canadian War painting. See note to No. 58 below.

58. THE CANADIAN TUNNELLING COMPANY: SAPPERS AT WORK, HILL 60, ST ELOI, *c.* 1918, *Plate 2*
Black chalk, 26¼×21¾
Lent by the Imperial War Museum

This and the following drawing are studies for the final version (Coll. National Gallery of Canada) of the painting *The Canadian Tunnelling Company: Sappers at Work*, commissioned from the artist in 1918 for the Canadian War Memorial.

59. STUDY FOR THE CANADIAN WAR PAINTING, [*circa* 1918
Ink and wash, 15½×12½
Lent by the Tate Gallery

See No. 58 above.

60. MEN AND WOMEN, 1919
Wash drawing, 10¼×7¾
Lent by Mrs R. Bridbury

This drawing and Nos. 61 and 62 are from a series of numerous drawings made in 1919, some of which were shown at the exhibition at 9 Duke Street, Adelphi. Many of them have subjects connected with the theatre.

61. STAIRWAY, 1919
Wash drawing, 10¼×7¾
Lent by Mrs R. Bridbury
See No. 60 above.

62. MOTHER AND SON, 1919
Pen and wash, 10¼×8
Lent by Mrs Bridburg
See No. 60 above.

63. MAGDALENIAN THEME, 1920
Watercolour, 18¾×21½
Lent by Mrs Lilian Bomberg

64. SEVILLANAS: DESIGN FOR A MURAL, 1920
Watercolour, 18¾×21½
Lent by Mrs Lilian Bomberg

65. THE CHINAMAN, 1921
Watercolour, 16×22
Lent by Bradford City Art Gallery

66. MOUNT OF OLIVES, 1923
Black chalk, 15×19¼
Lent by Alan Rowlands, Esq.

A drawing for the painting *Mount of Olives*, which was in the collection of Sir Ronald Storrs, and was destroyed by fire in Cyprus, 1931.

67. QUARRYING: JEWISH PIONEER LABOUR, 1923
Black chalk, 18½×24
Lent by Mrs Lilian Bomberg

68. PORTRAIT OF LENA MALNICK, 1943
Black and red chalk, 19¾×13¾
Lent by Miss Lena Malnick

69. EVENING IN THE CITY OF LONDON, 1944
Black chalk and wash, 24×18
Lent by Mrs Nancy Carne

70. EVENING IN THE CITY OF LONDON, 1944, *Plate 6*
Black chalk, 18¼×23¼
Lent by Mrs James Newmark

71. THE VALLEY OF THE TAJO, 1955, *Plate 7*
Charcoal, 27×39
Lent by Mrs Lilian Bomberg

72. RONDA, 1955
Charcoal
Lent by Charles Spencer, Esq.

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